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Congress for the New Urbanism Green Architecture and Urbanism Council

Jess Wendover

When the ophthalmologist Dr. Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof published the first Esperanto grammar in 1887, he envisioned the auxiliary language as a tool for increasing international understanding. The language continues to be spoken by nearly two million people, and the annual world Esperanto congress attracts an average of two thousand attendees, but Esperanto is now widely considered an anachronistic curiosity. The rise of more sophisticated means of translation and of English as a lingua franca have all but obviated the need for the form of communication Dr. Zamenhof envisioned. However, the history of the Esperanto movement and global reactions to its advocates' fervor should serve as a cautionary tale to the members of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU).

From November 30 through December 2, 2007, more than two hundred people gathered for the CNU's Green Architecture and Urbanism Council in Alexandria, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. Over three days, the event featured plenary lectures, discussion panels, and open dialogue sessions. Attendees, from around the world, included New Urbanism leaders and thinkers, professionals, government officials, and students.¹

The council highlight new opportunities for cooperation with an environmental movement of growing popularity, and it served as a reminder that CNU members have long advocated many principles of green urbanism. But in other respects it showed how some New Urbanists risk pushing their movement into irrelevance. Particularly difficult may be their insistence that the "Transect" system for categorizing development become a universal language for environmentally responsible development.

Best Foot Forward

In presentations at the council, practitioners who work on suburban retrofits, transportation planning, and passive stormwater management all demonstrated how traditional models of neighborhood development may be a significant help in combating human-induced climate change. Most of the Green Council attendees also moved quickly beyond seeking recognition for past work to discuss new tools or practices being developed within New Urbanism to advance a green agenda.

Among the council highlights was a presentation by Tom Low of a "Light Imprint Handbook." Low, a director of Duany Plater-Zyberk's Charlotte, North Carolina, office, argued that typical low-impact suburban development standards often yield poor designs, such as retention ponds circled in chain-link fence. His handbook merges discussion of the New Urbanist Transect, LEED for Neighborhood Development standards, and broad-stroke cost analyses of passive and active infrastructure techniques. It emphasizes sustainability, pedestrian-oriented design, and increased environmental and infrastructural efficiency.

Also a highlight was the panel "The Green Mile: Aligning Firm Ideology with Sustainability," at which representatives of Torti Gallas and Partners presented their Sustainability Process Checklist. Written to remind designers of such important issues as site selection, building adaptability, water conservation, energy use, materials selection, and community services, the checklist is organized so that a project manager can review it at each phase of a project, helping ensure a firm-wide commitment to sustainability.

Doug Farr's presentation on "Sustainable Urbanism," provided a third important moment. Drawn from his

recently published book, *Sustainable Urbanism: Urban Design with Nature* (Wiley, 2007), it provided the outline of a model sustainable neighborhood: around 160 acres with enough population to support retail and other uses within walking distance. Farr pointed out that this model development would also meet the LEED-ND criteria for diversity of uses, and cited a 2007 Zimmerman Volk study which showed that, given the option, more than one-third of surveyed consumers would prefer attached housing in compact communities.

The group then discussed the contribution of this type of neighborhood development toward solving the problems outlined in the widely lauded research paper "Growing Cooler: The Evidence of Urban Development and Climate Change," published in 2007 by the Urban Land Institute, Smart Growth America, the Center for Clean Air Policy, and the National Center for Smart Growth Research & Education. That paper documents how, in terms of carbon emissions, even technological advances in fuel economy will be negated if current driving patterns continue.²

While the conclusions of "Growing Cooler" were focused on federal policy, particularly reauthorization of a surface transportation bill, Green Council attendees argued that it also provides scientific support for the kind of neighborhood-based urbanism advocated by Farr.

Finally, a panel devoted to "What Can Schools Do?" brought together several academics with an ability to relate academic theory to design practice. Georgia Tech's Ellen Dunham-Jones presented statistics on the increasing number of students pursuing dual degrees in architecture and city planning, and discussed elements of the green design agenda proposed

for inclusion in an update to architecture school accreditation standards. Doug Kelbaugh, of the University of Michigan, presented an argument for considering equity hand-in-hand with environmental sustainability. And Mike Lykoudis poked fun at the New Urbanists' reputation within academia, claiming that at Notre Dame, "the plans for Seaside and Poundbury are tucked under every student's pillow." Those in attendance seemed to share the hope that a common interest in sustainability will open a new path to partnership between New Urbanism and American architecture schools

Enemies Foreign and Domestic

The Congress for the New Urbanism is far from new to issues currently being discussed under the umbrella of green development. Indeed, the group voted during a final open session to recommend that the CNU board adopt the tagline "promoting sustainable building for over twenty years." Some participants at the Green Council, however, seemed stuck in past modes of thinking, circling back to reference obstacles and critics from New Urbanism's early days as a movement struggling for relevance.

Part of the problem may be vision. Jeff Speck, former design director of the National Endowment for the Arts and for ten years the director of town planning at Duany-Plater Zyberk, explained that New Urbanism was formed from many different influences, but one common enemy: sprawl. Such tightly edited and argued texts as the Charter of the New Urbanism or Speck's own book with Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, *Suburban Nation*, were rallying cries against this universal foe. But at the Green Summit several other perceived enemies seemed to be emerging: American academia,

stylistic relativism, architectural modernism, the smart growth policy movement, Ed Mazria and his Architecture 2030 movement, and even environmentalists (referred to by one speaker as "hippies"). The demonization of such a wide swath of the design field signals a weakness in New Urbanism's organization.

Many potential partners of the CNU admire its success, but they resist adopting its more codified positions. In particular, the Transect system of categorizing land use by intensity (ranging from urban core to rural boundary) asks practitioners to adopt this new framework in place of various long-standing, proven professional systems. Like Esperantists, New Urbanists seem convinced that the rest of the world should take up their cause to the exclusion of others. Instead of recognizing that other professions, advocates, and associations have already developed their own internal modes of communication, many within the New Urbanist movement believe the Transect should be the guiding framework for all urban development. In fact, the Transect diverges from existing professional practices so profoundly that insisting on strict adherence to it raises suspicions that its advocates are ignorant of other professional cultures.

During the final day of the Green Council, the group discussed the widely lauded LEED for Neighborhood Development (LEED-ND) project, of which the CNU is a founding partner along with the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). LEED-ND is a shining example of the CNU's ability to promote widespread transformation of the mass-market built environment. But even this program came under criticism because the other partner

organizations oppose integrating the Transect into the LEED-ND framework. The USGBC, in particular, is hesitant to redesign the LEED-ND system around the Transect. The USGBC needs to demonstrate a measurable and objective system as it advocates that its various LEED products be adopted as regulations by public agencies and standard practices by the development community. The impact of the Transect on green urbanism is more subject to interpretation, and certainly more difficult to define and quantify.

Operating in a new green world will inevitably require breaking down the barriers that have prevented different professions from sharing strategies and knowledge. CNU deserves recognition for its ability to promote more compact and environmentally sustainable development, but it's difficult to envision the CNU as a partner in effective future collaborations when the organization is so openly critical of its own most widely publicized collaborative project (LEED-ND). The organization's broader goals might be more appealing to new audiences if, instead of teaching the world to speak Transect, the group could learn the lingo of other groups and influence them by bringing traditional neighborhood development to them on their own terms.

True Faith

In a discussion that perhaps captures the central crisis of the CNU, the Green Council considered a proposal to amend or append the CNU's 1996 Charter document. Titled "The Nature of Building Canons: Sustainable Architecture and Urbanism Principles," the amendment proposed "amplifying" the Charter. The council, over one hundred and fifty strong at this point, reached an

impasse over a line that referred to creating human settlements only with buildings with both “vertical and horizontal walkability” (that is, without mechanical lift systems—which would limit supported development to six stories or fewer). Supporters and opponents of the proposed wording argued emotionally for their sides, with supporters of the language associating tall buildings with the most nightmarish problems of state-subsidized and -managed housing projects. Many in attendance, however, argued that for the movement to remain relevant, it couldn’t take a universal stand against more dense development. Eventually, the entire proposal was shuttled to a future committee meeting for clarification.

Some level of committee referral is to be expected as a response to a proposal like this from the floor; clearly, wordsmithing becomes an absurd art form in a room of one hundred and fifty people. But the debate about highrise buildings (as well as other differences of opinion expressed at the Green Council) arguably rises above the level of word choice to indicate a real identity debate.

To its credit, the CNU has never adopted a rigid decision-making structure or membership criteria, preferring a flexible and grassroots-based system. But early on, CNU leaders also recognized the dangers of allowing individual actors to employ the name “New Urbanism” to describe work that at best accidentally misunderstood the principles of the movement, and at worst, knowingly used the term to capture market demand without reflecting the organization’s underlying values. The original invitation to the first organized meeting of the Congress in 1993 stated, “This is a crucial time of transition from practice by a few to acceptance by the

mainstream of the professions. The situation requires that standards be set so that those who insist on producing the ersatz are marginalized.”

Over the years, the CNU has proved reluctant to question its purported adherents, even about views that fall outside established, shared principles. Thus, the 2007 Green Council brought together speakers and members who represented a wide range of viewpoints under the big tent of traditional neighborhood development. However, it also resulted in the presentation of dissonant viewpoints that seemed more successful at alienating potential new partners than encouraging new initiatives. Clearly, a speaker who paired images of a quaint Nantucket storefront with a middle-American waffle house to demonstrate that some buildings are “loveable” while others aren’t was playing more to an in-crowd than trying to bring new followers into the fold. For such a rare, large gathering of powerful minds, much time was devoted to discussion of real and perceived slights towards the movement, instead of constructive responses like supporting the work of existing envoys to perceived outsider groups like academia, environmentalism, or the smart growth movement.

A real lesson for New Urbanism from the history of Esperanto is the list of enemies the international language movement has engendered. Esperantists have also defied the efforts of international bodies like the United Nations because those groups have relied on more traditional means of solving the problem of international communication (adding more languages, hiring more interpreters and translators, and ensuring that all employees are multilingual). New Urbanists should avoid such rigid positions. While it’s clear they deserve

a seat when issues of sustainability are being discussed, they should focus on being good tablemates, even if the Transect is not what is being served.

Note

1. The Green Council has met five times previously. Other CNU councils include, for example, a Classical Architecture Council. CNU members are invited to participate in councils that are relevant to their work, and the results are reported back to the general membership on the organization’s website and at its annual meeting. Specific recommendations from a council can be taken to the board of directors for consideration as official policy, including potential revisions to the Charter of the New Urbanism.
2. The full “Growing Cooler” report is now available from the Urban Land Institute bookstore (Washington, D.C.); www.uli.org.